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Soviet Said to Lead U.S. by 8,000 Warheads

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WASHINGTON, June 17 — The Soviet Union has moved ahead of the United States in numbers of nuclear warheads, according to a new Defense Department estimate.

Obtained by advocates of arms control, the estimate indicates that the Soviet Union has about 34,000 nuclear warheads for its bombers, long-range and medium-range missiles, artillery and cruise missiles.

The United States, by comparison, has 26,000 warheads.

The new estimate, prepared under the auspices of the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Atomic Affairs, Richard L. Wagner, shows that the Soviet Union overtook the United States in nuclear warheads more than five years ago.

Until now, both government and private estimates of nuclear arsenals have reported the United States with a greater stockpile of nuclear warheads and the Soviet Union with a larger number of means of delivery, primarily in missiles.

A spokesman for the Defense Department confirmed that the Pentagon had determined that the Soviet Union had overtaken the United States in numbers of nuclear warheads. But he declined to discuss specific numbers either for the Soviet Union or the United States.

The spokesman said the new estimate, which shows that the Soviet Union reached equality with the United States in warheads in 1978, was based on recent intelligence assumptions and assessments that he said were more "sophisticated" than earlier versions.

President Reagan may have alluded to the new estimate in London on June 10 when he was asked about a large gathering by antinuclear protesters. Mr. Reagan said he wondered whether

any of the London demonstrators "stopped to think that no one is demonstrating, and they're not demonstrating, in the nation that has the most nuclear weapons of all" — meaning the Soviet Union.

Mr. Wagner used the new estimate in testimony during a closed session of a Congressional committee in March, displaying a chart that showed a rise in the number of Soviet nuclear warheads since 1965 while the number of United States warheads gradually declined.

The chart Mr. Wagner displayed was obtained under the Freedom of Information Act by William M. Arkin, a specialist in nuclear arms at the Institute for Policy Studies here, and Jeffrey I. Sands, a researcher at the National Resources Defense Council.

Politics Cutting Two Ways

The politics of the new estimate has begun to cut two ways. The Reagan Administration has used the estimate, as in confidential briefings to Congress, to argue that the Soviet Union is leading the arms race and thus the United States must expand and modernize its nuclear arms, including development of the MX missile.

Advocates on arms control, many of whom are critical of the Reagan Administration, are beginning to use the new estimate to underscore the pace of the arms race and the urgency of negotiations to bring the arms race under control.

Mr. Arkin and Mr. Sands make that argument in an article they wrote for the June issue of Arms Control Today, published by the Arms Control Association. The association describes itself as a nonpartisan organization dedicated to promoting understanding of arms control and disarmament.

A spokesman for the Pentagon said that Mr. Wagner sought to justify the President's program to modernize the United States nuclear force. The most

contentious issue there has been the intercontinental ballistic missile known as MX, or Peacekeeper.

Restrictions by Congress

That program has been continued under restrictions imposed by the House and it barely survived a Senate vote last week.

Mr. Wagner argued that the buildup of the Soviet Union's nuclear stockpile was unabated and would continue, since the Soviet capacity to produce warheads was so great, unless the United States displayed the ability to match Moscow if need be.

Mr. Arkin and Mr. Sands are also collaborating on a data book about Soviet nuclear weapons. In their article, they estimate that the Soviet stockpile of warheads ranges from 21,400 to 41,250, about half of them built since 1979.

The maximum figure, they explain, reflects an assumption that all Soviet missiles able to carry multiple independent re-entry warheads are indeed armed to the limit. In addition, they assume all silos able to be reloaded have warheads available for reloading and that artillery pieces and missiles able to fire both nuclear and conventional warheads have a full supply of nuclear warheads.

The minimum figure would reflect an assumption that the Soviet Union has assembled only enough warheads to load its weapons with the minimum number of warheads they are able to carry or fire.

Mr. Arkin and Mr. Sands asserted that the Defense Department had inflated the figures and called that a "warhead gap."

The spokesman for the Defense Department said that, in addition to the factors cited by Mr. Arkin and Mr. Sands, the Pentagon has other sources of information used to arrive at its new estimate. He declined to elaborate because those methods are top secret.